

Take Thank Break Give

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
October 6, 2019—World Communion Sunday

- Luke 22:19-20 (Good News Translation) ¹⁹ Then he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." ²⁰ In the same way, he gave them the cup after the supper, saying, "This cup is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you.
- 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (Good News Translation) ²³ For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, ²⁴ gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, "This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me." ²⁶ This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus' four actions in instituting the Lord's Supper (taking and thanking and breaking and giving) also remind us of what he calls us to do in our daily lives as we bear witness to him.

While I was away for a sabbatical all summer our church enjoyed a unique situation. As you know, different members of the church stepped up each week, giving us a variety of lay preachers. But for those Sundays when we celebrated communion, Presbyterian tradition doesn't allow laypersons to administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Ordinarily that is to be conducted by an ordained minister, and most churches would have to hire a minister to lead that Sunday's service.

But at our church right now we have a church elder who is in the midst of seminary studies in order to become an ordained minister (Kathy Hartzell). She's been studying theology and Church history and worship and sacraments. So we asked the appropriate presbytery leaders if it might be possible for Kathy to be authorized to administer the sacrament of communion only here at this church and only for those three Sundays. To our delight, they said Yes.

In seminary classes you *talk* about leading the Lord's Supper... but most ministers don't experience *actually conducting* the service until they've been ordained and are serving a congregation. So Kathy had the unusual opportunity of being able to experience leading a communion service even before she's been ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Many people told me that she handled it well (which doesn't surprise me at all). But I can imagine some of the nerves Kathy may have felt standing behind the table, looking out at you: wanting to say and do the right thing, wanting to maintain the historical tradition. When it comes to leading worship, there's a "first time" for everyone.

That thought—"a first time for everything"—got me wondering: we know Jesus instituted the practice we call communion during that Last Supper with his disciples in an Upper Room. That was the "first communion." How did the "second communion" happen? I wonder how the practice went beyond what Jesus did in that room on that night. Of course, Luke's gospel says that Jesus told his disciples, "Do this in remembrance of me."¹

But how did that happen? Who conducted that "second communion" service? Obviously the tradition continued. As we heard this morning, the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, "For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you."² By that Paul meant that a tradition started by Jesus had been passed down through the years from person to person, from faith community to faith community. But that communion tradition reached Paul perhaps *twenty-five years after* Jesus began it.

So back to Jesus and the apostles... after Jesus directed them to "Do this in remembrance of me," how did that tradition *get* going and *keep* going? At some point, one of the apostles who had been in that Upper Room must have taken some bread and said, "Remember what Jesus told us at our Last Supper

¹ Luke 22:19 RSV

² 1 Corinthians 11:23a Good News Translation

together? Remember? He took bread, thanked God and broke the bread. And when he gave it to us, remember what he said? He said, *'This is my body which is for you.'* Then he took the cup of celebration and before he passed it among us he said, *'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'* Remember? He told us *'Do this in remembrance of me.'*"³

There had to be a first time that someone re-enacted the bread-and-cup ritual that Jesus had begun. And then they did it again, and again. And then another apostle also did it, and then others also began to re-enact that ritual. And so it continued.

Church historians believe that during the first few centuries of Christianity, what was said was not as important as what was done: "the four actions of taking bread, giving thanks, breaking it, and giving it to be eaten...; [whatever words were spoken identified] the bread with Jesus' body, and similarly with respect to the cup."⁴

Eventually there would be other firsts. Remember that Jesus probably spoke to his disciples in the ancient language of Aramaic (a language similar to Hebrew). But at some point one of the disciples or missionaries must have conducted a communion service with a group of believers in Asia Minor, and he would have described the actions of Jesus not in the language of Aramaic but in Greek. Another missionary of the early church must have described the ritual in the Coptic language of Egypt. And on and on it must have gone, with the Lord's Supper being introduced in various *places*, using various *phrases* spoken in a variety of *languages*.

But what they all had in common – in common to this very day! – are the four actions: taking, thanking, breaking, giving. Wherever communion is celebrated to *remind* us of Jesus and to *bind* us to him, we remember and enact those actions of taking, thanking, breaking, giving.

Can you see how Jesus' communion actions of *taking*, *thanking*, *breaking* and *giving* actually capture the essence of what Jesus calls us to do as his followers?

- First, *taking*, or "receiving" – he calls us to recognize and accept our lives as God's gift, embracing it all.
- Next, *thanking* – we're not merely to receive or "take" God's gifts, but we're to express gratitude rather than ignoring the blessing by taking it for granted.
- Then, *breaking* – picture a loaf of bread. It's a thing of beauty in its simplicity and commonness... but you can't partake of the loaf until it's opened by "breaking" it, perhaps with your hands or maybe with a knife. So the act of "breaking" symbolizes making a blessing open to being shared with others.
- Which leads us to the final action of *giving* – When I was in seventh grade I had a crush on Janice. One day I spent a good 79¢ on a brooch featuring her initial "J." I took it to school, put it in my locker... and there it sat until I had to clean out my locker on the last day of school. I was too scared to give it to her. You see, a gift is of no value if it's never given. In communion Jesus reminds us not only to make the gift available but to present it, to give it, to put it into action.

We take, thank, break, give.

Countless communion services occur not just today of course but throughout the year. They may take place in small mountain village chapels or remote dirt-floor clearings or in grand landmark cathedrals or tidy suburban brick churches. On World Communion Sunday we celebrate that every communion service reminds us what Jesus did. His four actions of taking and thanking and breaking and giving also remind us of what he calls us to do in our daily lives as we bear witness to him. Let's be purposeful in

- "Taking" or receiving God's gift of life;
- "Thanking" God with sincerely grateful hearts;
- "Breaking" or making available to others the gifts we've received from God; and
- "Giving" with the generosity that God has shown to us, taking the treasures we've been given and putting them to use.

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³ See Luke 22:19-20 Revised Standard Version

⁴ Ros Clarke, "The Function of the Words of Institution in the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" in *The Theologian: the internet journal for integrated theology*, at <http://www.theologian.org.uk/church/wordsofinstitution.html>, accessed 10/1/2019